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AUTHOR Keith, Patricia B.; Wetherbee, Michael J.; Kindzia, Debora L.

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ABSTRACT

Since motivation is an essential element in school success, it becomes critical that school psychologists understand how academic motivation influences middle school students' academic achievement. The behavior characteristics exhibited by academically motivated middle school students and some interventions for at-risk students are reported. The research was based on a group of eighth grade students (N=149) who live in a small rural community. The students, along with 16 teachers, were asked to complete various surveys. Additionally, students' school records were used to provide background information. Factor analysis of the results suggests that students identified the following characteristics as those that academically motivated students possess: they complete their schoolwork, do what they are supposed to in school, do their best in school, get good grades, and have good work habits. Teachers perceived motivated students to believe school is important, work hard in school, love school and love learning, have positive attitudes about school, and have high educational aspirations. Results indicate that students' school behavior directly influences teachers' perception of motivation and that teacher perception of motivation influences grades; that is, students' motivation and their school behaviors directly influence their grades. (RJM)

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Running Head: IDENTIFYING UNMOTIVATED STUDENTS AND INTERVENING

Identifying Unmotivated Students: Planning School-Wide Interventions

Patricia B. Keith, PhD
Michael J. Wetherbee
Debora L. Kindzia

Alfred University

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Correspondence should be sent to Patricia B. Keith, Division of School Psychology, Alfred University, 26 North Main Street, Alfred, NY 14802. Internet: fkeithp@bigvax.alfred.edu

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Abstract

School psychologists often hear about students who are unmotivated in school and are asked by teachers and principals "what can we do?" Since motivation is believed to be an essential element to success in school, it becomes critical that school psychologists understand: how academic motivation influences middle school students' academic achievement; what behavioral characteristics do academically motivated middle school students have; and what interventions can be used with students who are not academically motivated. Using structural equations analysis, this research sought to answer these questions. Based on significant findings, child-focused and system-focused recommendations are presented.

Identifying Unmotivated Students: Planning School-Wide Interventions

School psychologists often hear about students who are unmotivated in school and are asked by teachers and principals "what can we do?" Although motivation is believed to be an essential element to success in school, there are few longitudinal research studies which investigate academic motivation. Academic motivation is defined in numerous ways and is measured in numerous ways (Boekaerts, 1986). Many believe that students have a predisposition to learn (Bruner, 1966) and are affected by various entry behaviors (Bloom, 1976). Additionally, intrinsic and extrinsic factors are said to influence students' motivation (Cooley & Leinhardt, 1975). Students must also have a willingness to invest time in mastering a learning objective to be successful in school (Carroll, 1963). This research sought to answer the following questions: (1) does academic motivation influence middle school students' academic achievement? (2) what behavioral characteristics do academically motivated middle school students have? and (3) what interventions can be used for students who are not academically motivated?

Method

This research is based on a group of eighth grade students (N=149) who live in a small rural community in New York. All eighth graders in the school district and their teachers (N=16) were asked to complete a number of different surveys. The return rate for the student survey was 94% and the return rate for the teachers' survey was 86%. Additionally, students' school records were used to provide background information, and the middle school principal completed a survey about the school, student, and teacher characteristics. A theoretical model was developed and used to guide this research (see Figure 1); it was based on previous research, logic, and knowledge of students. The model controls for important student background influences (gender, family background, and previous achievement). Student motivation and teacher report of student motivation are composite variables which were developed using factor analysis; these are the intervening variables in the model. Students' grades from two grading periods (taken from official school records) were averaged and used as the dependent variable.

Structural equations analysis (path analysis) was used to analyze the data. Results were viewed as significant **only if** the path coefficients (betas, β) were .05 or greater, **and** were statistically significant ($p < .05$).

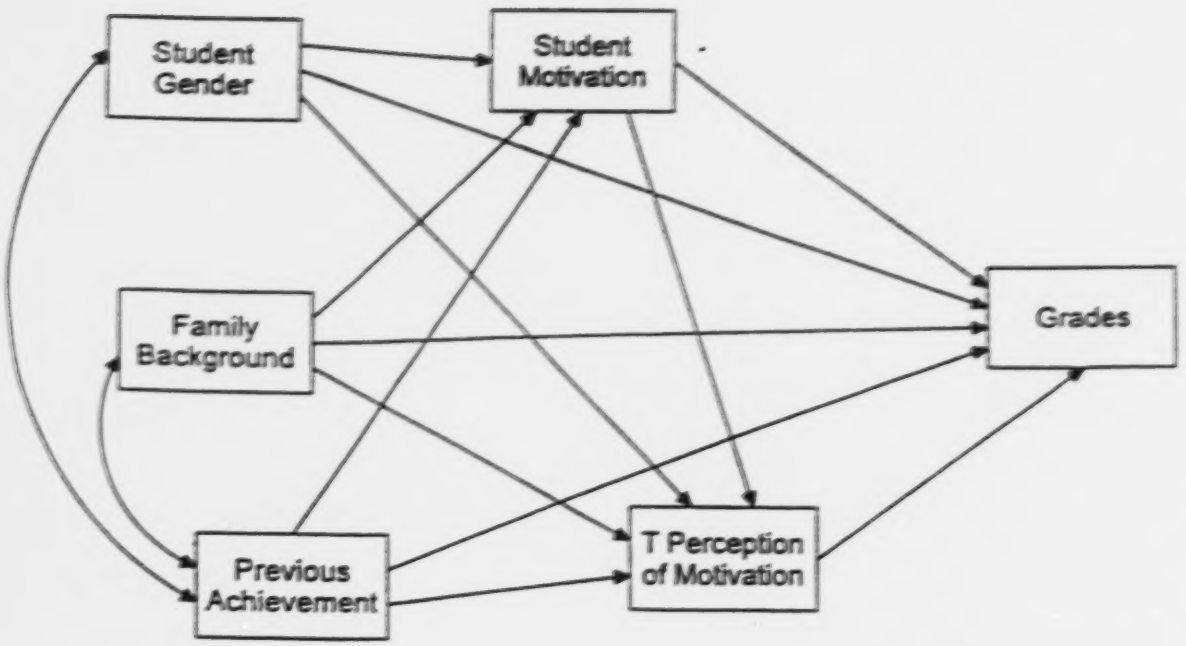

Figure 1. Theoretical Model

Results and Discussion

Factor analysis suggested that students identified the following characteristics as those that academically motivated students possess: complete their school work, do what they are supposed to in school, do their best in school, get good grades, and have good work habits. Factor analysis of the teachers' survey items suggest that teachers' perceive students to be motivated when students believe school is important, work hard in school, love school and love learning, have positive attitudes about school, and have high educational aspirations. It is interesting to note that students and teachers have similar opinions about characteristics of motivated students, but not identical. As might be expected, students description of motivated students was less developed or not as complete as their teachers definition.

As might be expected, students' motivation had a large positive influence on academic achievement, as measured by grades (β=.354). Interestingly, teachers' perception of a students' level of motivation also had a large positive influence on academic motivation (β=.521), but students' gender did not influence the grades students earn (β=-.096). Family background (β=-.079) and previous achievement (β=.002) did not influence students grades. Some of these results warrant further investigation; the family background and previous achievement results are not consistent with previous research (e.g. Keith, T.Z. et al., 1993). These discrepancies may be influenced by the sample size used in this research.

Perhaps the most intriguing results are the influence of student motivation on teachers' perception of student motivation (β=.717), and the lack of influence of gender on student motivation (β=-.034), teachers' perception of motivation (β=-.033), and student grades (β=-.096). These results suggest that students' school behavior directly influences teachers' perception of motivation (β=.717), and that teacher perception of motivation influences the grades that students earn (β=.521). Also, the total effect these variables have on grades is significant (β= .758). This means that students' motivation and their school behaviors (as perceived by their teachers) directly influences the grades that they earn. Additionally, it appears that the gender of the student does not influence their motivation (β=-.034), teachers perception of motivation (β=-.033), or the grades that

they earn (β=-.026). Often females are believed to be more academically motivated in eighth grade, but these results do not support that belief. Males and females, in eighth grade, appear to be equally motivated, are perceived as equally motivated, and earn similar grades.

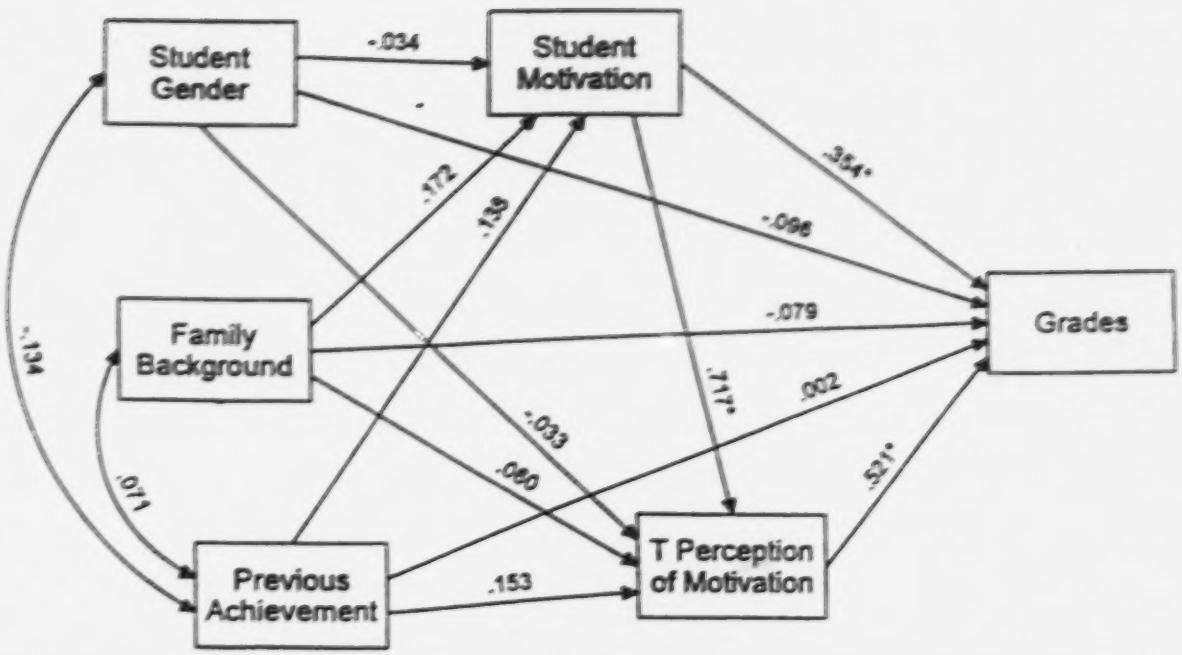

Figure 2. Effects of Gender, Family Background, Previous Achievement, Student Motivation, and Teacher Perceptions of Motivation on Student Grades

Summary and Recommendations

Research results confirm what many school psychologists believe -- students who are motivated do well in school. Students who have positive beliefs about school, work hard, and have high educational aspiration are motivated, and that motivation can directly influence the grades that they earn. Additionally, students who appear motivated in school (as perceived by their teachers) can influence the grades that they earn as well. Although it is often thought that females are more motivated than males in eighth grade, research findings do not support this notion.

Results from this research have important implications for school psychologists. Furthermore, these research results can guide school psychologists interested in developing intervention strategies to motivate students. These interventions can be either child-focused or system-focused in nature. Child-focused interventions could include: increasing appropriate school behaviors through skills streaming activities (Goldstein, 1988); developing more positive attitudes about school through peer counseling sessions; establishing a mentoring program with community members; and raising educational aspirations of students. Some system-focused interventions could include: supplying students with daily assignment books and encouraging parents and teachers to regularly check them; establishing a study-skills curriculum for students; bringing motivational speakers to talk with students at school; initiating a screening program to identify students with low motivational levels; and encouraging teachers and parents to have high educational aspirations and high behavioral expectations for all students.

Since these results are from the first year of a five year long study, the findings are considered preliminary at this time. Currently data is being gathered concerning students' career aspirations, grades earned since eighth grade, views on appropriate and inappropriate school behaviors, ninth grade motivational level, work status (paid jobs outside of the home), and involvements in extra curricular school activities.

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